

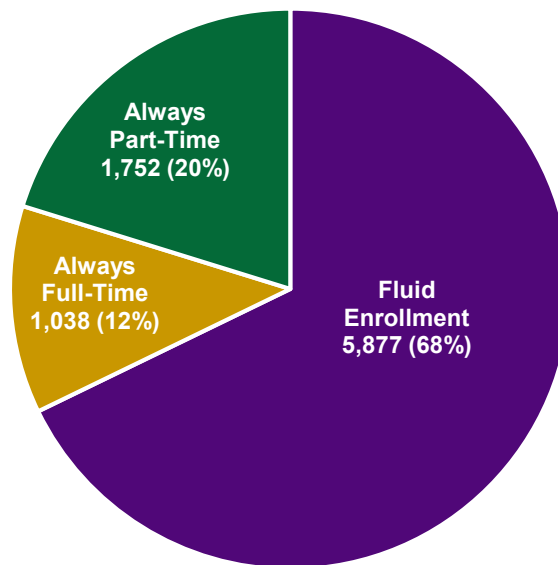
RESEARCH BRIEF

Strategies to Support Part-Time Students

Unlike the traditional full-time student who attends college shortly after graduating from high school, the average part-time student is older, financially independent, and returning to college from the workforce. In addition to balancing academic pursuits with personal and professional responsibilities, a part-time student may also grapple with how to finance their education or apply for financial aid. Each of these challenges can delay or impede a part-time student's ability to be successful in college and achieve their academic goals.¹

At NOVA, the majority of first-time to college, program-placed (FTTN/PP) students will enroll part-time at least once during their education. (Figure 1) As a result, part-time students will drive the overall completion rates for the College. Therefore, in order to help every student to succeed, it will be critical for NOVA to develop effective strategies for this student population. This Research Brief summarizes five best practice strategies that can guide NOVA's efforts to support part-time students.

**Figure 1. NOVA Enrollment Patterns Over Four Years
(Fall 2014 to Spring 2018): Fall 2014 FTTN/PP Cohort**



¹ Bombardieri, M. (2017). *Hidden in Plain Sight: Understanding Part-Time College Students in America*. Center for American Progress.

Strategy #1: Create “Learning Communities” to provide part-time students with a supportive network that promotes engagement and success.

Since the average part-time student is balancing the responsibilities of daily life with their academic pursuits, they have less time to spend on campus interacting with faculty and peers. As a result, part-time students are less likely to visit and utilize the services of academic centers, libraries, advising facilities, and computer labs. Limited time on campus can negatively affect student engagement, which research consistently shows to be a determinant of retention and overall student success.²

To help part-time students better engage with the campus community, Bunker Hill Community College (Bunker Hill) in Boston, Massachusetts, has created “learning communities” for students.³ Building on a model often used by four-year colleges for full-time students, Bunker Hill uses learning communities to foster connections among part-time students and their professors, and provide students with a supportive academic network. Typically, learning communities involve a group of students taking two or more classes together. At Bunker Hill, all students enrolled in nine or more credits are required to enroll in a Learning Community Seminar or a Learning Community Cluster within their first year. This strategy has had a significant impact on part-time students in particular: part-time students who enrolled in one of Bunker Hill’s learning communities were observed to be seven percent more likely than other part-time students to remain enrolled one year later.⁴

While Bunker Hill only requires some part-time students (those enrolled in nine or more credit hours) to participate in a learning community, this strategy could be expanded to include all degree-seeking part-time students, regardless of credit load.

Strategy #2: Educate and inform part-time students regarding their options for financial aid.

Compared to full-time students, many part-time students are financially independent and employed full- or part-time while enrolled in college. As a result, part-time students typically experience more financial challenges than a full-time student.⁵ However, despite greater financial need on average, part-time students also receive fewer federal, state, and institutional grants, scholarships, and loans than full-time students.⁶ Among households making \$30,000 or less per year, adult part-time students receive enough financial aid to cover roughly 19 percent of the cost of attending a two-year institution. Conversely, first-time in college, full-time students receive enough financial aid to cover 48 percent of the cost of attending a two-year institution.⁷

To help part-time students overcome financial challenges and cover the cost of college, NOVA will need to ensure part-time students are informed and educated about their options for financial aid.

² *Why Focus on Student Engagement?* Center for Community College Student Engagement. Retrieved from: http://www.ccsse.org/center/about_cccse/focus.cfm

³ Bombardieri, M. (2018). *A Promising Model to Boost Retention for Part-Time Students*. Center for American Progress.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bombardieri, M. (2017). *Hidden in Plain Sight: Understanding Part-Time College Students in America*. Center for American Progress.

⁶ Tandberg, D., Laderman, S., and Carlson, A. (2017). *A Federal-State Partnership for True College Affordability*. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association.

⁷ (2018). *Reframing the Question of Equity: Understanding the Growing Importance of Success for Community Colleges’ Part-Time Students*. EAB.

Additionally, initiatives like NOVA's Financial Stability Program can help students weather financial emergencies that may make it difficult to continue to pay for courses. When students understand how they can best finance their education, they may be less likely to stop out or drop out before achieving their academic goals.

Strategy #3: Develop modified academic plans with part-time students in mind.

At most colleges, academic plans—such as which courses a student needs to take to graduate with a specific degree, and in what order and when they should take them—are constructed with full-time enrollment in mind. A part-time student often has to decide for themselves how to modify these academic plans to fit a part-time credit load. This becomes problematic when a part-time student has unrealistic expectations regarding time to completion: while about half of part-time students expect to complete a degree within *two* years, less than one-in-ten will graduate within *four* years.⁸ As a result, a part-time student may make mistakes when pacing themselves toward a degree—for example, by missing a course or taking a sequence out of order—which can further delay their progress.

Part-time students require academic plans that account for smaller credit loads and provide realistic pathways to degree attainment. One way in which a college can do this is by modifying existing academic plans to fit the average part-time credit load (roughly two courses a semester). For students with variable credit loads, academic advising should include services that will help students to build an academic plan specific to their schedule each semester, and determine on a case-by-case basis optimal course sequencing.

Strategy #4: Provide options to accelerate progress toward degree completion.

In order to better serve part-time students' demanding schedules, there is some evidence colleges are experimenting with shorter course lengths as a way to accelerate credit accumulation and time to completion.⁹ For example, Trident Technical College (Trident) in Charleston, South Carolina transitioned from a 14-week semester to two seven-week terms each fall and spring. Not only does this allow part-time students to accumulate more credits each semester (since they can now enroll in two seven-week courses instead of one 14-week course), but Trident has also observed improvements in overall student success. At another institution, Odessa College in Odessa, Texas, uses accelerated eight-week sessions alongside traditional 16-week sessions.¹⁰

⁸ (2018). *Reframing the Question of Equity: Understanding the Growing Importance of Success for Community Colleges' Part-Time Students*. EAB.

⁹ Flaherty, C. (2016). *Grading on a Curve*. Inside Higher Ed.

¹⁰ Smith, Ashley A. (2018). *Building Community for Part-Time Students*. Inside Higher Ed.

For some students, particularly part-time students who often have other personal and professional commitments, a 16-week course may require more time than they are willing or able to give. As a result, they may stop out for a semester or only enroll in one or two classes a year. Longer courses can also increase the possibility that a student will withdraw from a course mid-semester due to an unexpected life event or changes to their work schedule. Providing options for shorter sessions and promoting enrollment in the summer terms, in addition to traditional course lengths, can allow some part-time students to fit the courses they need into their busy schedules and accumulate more credits each academic year.

Strategy #5: Adjust hours of operation to accommodate non-traditional students.

Since many part-time students are employed full- or part-time, they are less likely to be able to visit campus during peak business hours. Not only can this impact the courses in which they are able to enroll (pushing them toward online, evening, and weekend classes and smaller credit loads), but it can also affect their access to on-campus support services. Student services such as financial aid counseling, academic advising, and tutoring, may need to expand hours of operation to allow for part-time students to utilize them during off-peak business hours.